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EPA Issues First National Standards for Mercury Pollution from Power Plants

Historic "Mercury and Air Toxics Standards" Meet 20-Year Old Requirement to Cut Dangerous Smokestack Emissions

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has issued the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, the first national standards to protect American families from power plant emissions of mercury and toxic air pollution like arsenic, acid gas, nickel, selenium, and cyanide. The standards will slash emissions of these dangerous pollutants by relying on widely available, proven pollution controls that are already in use at more than half of the nation's coal-fired power plants.

EPA estimates that the new safeguards will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year. The standards will also help America's children grow up healthier – preventing 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms and about 6,300 fewer cases of acute bronchitis among children each year.

"By cutting emissions that are linked to developmental disorders and respiratory illnesses like asthma, these standards represent a major victory for clean air and public health– and especially for the health of our children. With these standards that were two decades in the making, EPA is rounding out a year of incredible progress on clean air in America with another action that will benefit the American people for years to come," said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. "The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards will protect millions of families and children from harmful and costly air pollution and provide the American people with health benefits that far outweigh the costs of compliance."

"Since toxic air pollution from power plants can make people sick and cut lives short, the new Mercury and Air Toxics Standards are a huge victory for public health," said Albert A. Rizzo, MD, National Volunteer Chair of the American Lung Association, and pulmonary and critical care physician in Newark, Delaware. "The Lung Association expects all oil and coal-fired power plants to act now to protect all Americans, especially our children, from the health risks imposed by these dangerous air pollutants."

More than 20 years ago, a bipartisan Congress passed the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments and mandated that EPA require control of toxic air pollutants including mercury. To meet this requirement, EPA worked extensively with stakeholders, including industry, to minimize cost and maximize flexibilities in these final standards. There were more than 900,000 public comments that helped inform the final standards being announced today. Part of this feedback encouraged EPA to ensure the standards focused on readily available and widely deployed pollution control technologies, that are not only manufactured by companies in the United States, but also support short-term and long-term jobs. EPA estimates that manufacturing, engineering, installing and maintaining the pollution controls to meet these standards will provide employment for thousands, potentially including 46,000 short-term construction jobs and 8,000 long-term utility jobs.

Power plants are the largest remaining source of several toxic air pollutants, including mercury, arsenic, cyanide, and a range of other dangerous pollutants, and are responsible for half of the mercury and over 75 percent of the acid gas emissions in the United States. Today, more than half of all coal-fired power plants already deploy pollution control technologies that will help them meet these achievable standards. Once final, these standards will level the playing field by ensuring the remaining plants – about 40 percent of all coal fired power plants - take similar steps to decrease dangerous pollutants.

As part of the commitment to maximize flexibilities under the law, the standards are accompanied by a Presidential Memorandum that directs EPA to use tools provided in the Clean Air Act to implement the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards in a cost-effective manner that ensures electric reliability. For example, under these standards, EPA is not only providing the standard three years for compliance, but also encouraging permitting authorities to make a fourth year broadly available for technology installations, and if still more time is needed, providing a well-defined pathway to address any localized reliability problems should they arise.

Mercury has been shown to harm the nervous systems of children exposed in the womb, impairing thinking, learning and early development, and other pollutants that will be reduced by these standards can cause cancer, premature death, heart disease, and asthma.

The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, which are being issued in response to a court deadline, are in keeping with President Obama's Executive Order on regulatory reform. They are based on the latest data and provide industry significant flexibility in implementation through a phased-in approach and use of already existing technologies.

The standards also ensure that public health and economic benefits far outweigh costs of implementation. EPA estimates that for every dollar spent to reduce pollution from power plants, the American public will see up to $9 in health benefits. The total health and economic benefits of this standard are estimated to be as much as $90 billion annually.

The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards and the final Cross-State Air Pollution Rule, which was issued earlier this year, are the most significant steps to clean up pollution from power plant smokestacks since the Acid Rain Program of the 1990s.

Combined, the two rules are estimated to prevent up to 46,000 premature deaths, 540,000 asthma attacks among children, 24,500 emergency room visits and hospital admissions. The two programs are an investment in public health that will provide a total of up to $380 billion in return to American families in the form of longer, healthier lives and reduced health care costs.

More information: www.epa.gov/mats